

Published: 13:33 september 28, 2015

The wrong kind of sacrifice

[Namia Akhtar](#)

Eid-ul-Azha has become more about the price of our cattle than the extent of our sacrifice

Eid is an occasion to reconnect with our higher selves, the transcendent self that exists within us to connect with the celestial and to instill at least a fragment of that celestial order in our lives. Nonetheless, in contemporary Muslim society in urban Bangladesh, Eid-ul-Azha has evolved into a social festival -- and less of a religious one -- that provides the middle class and the upper class with an opportunity to aggrandise their self-esteem. The days preceding the Eid-ul-Azha become a podium for self-aggrandisement which is performed and established through the comparisons made among sacrificial animals.

This comparison takes place through catechising at multiple levels, beginning with the price inquiry, then the marketplace from where the cow was bought, the quantity, the variety of animals bought by the household, and the number of shareholders. Some inquire into the price to judge the animal's cost-effectiveness and to feel a sense of superiority in their economic purchase, while others inquire to take pleasure from having haggled it down to exclusive prices. Since higher earnings in our society is associated with that of a higher social status, the acquisition of expensive, super-sized cows provides heightened prestige to the family.

Nonetheless, some also take pride in buying an "economic cow," as it reflects an enhanced sense of masculinity and intelligence in terms of portraying better bargaining power among the men in the family. Thus, both exclusiveness and cost-effectiveness of the purchase stipulate gratification.

Additionally, individuals and families who are in acquisition of exclusive cows feel acute hubris. Hubris of the self emerges, as the dearly-priced animals are markers of class distinction that are unreachable to the other classes, setting a mark of distinctive pride. More than a religious festival, Eid-ul-Azha has become a festival to display one's social standing through the animals that come into one's possession, through which recognition is acquired within the inter-class and intra-class social parameters.

In urban Dhaka, the quantity of the sacrificial animals is also crucial and acts as a status symbol, since the quantity of sacrificial animals is perceived to have a positive correlation with the religiosity and piousness of the family.

Intriguingly, the social perception of Eid-ul-Azha as an occasion for equitable protein distribution within society, contradicts the way it is being observed. When it comes to the implementation of equitable protein distribution, the best portions of meat are kept for the cooking of sumptuous meat dishes to satisfy the cravings of the “privileged” stomachs.

Families claiming to be religious store significant portions of the finest meat for the demonstration of culinary skills, while the needy are given only the bare minimum, even though Islam strongly focuses on distributing a substantial portion of the meat to the poverty-stricken. From an Islamic perspective, giving away considerable portions of meat is gainful in terms of its contribution to the spiritual essence of human beings, as well as for life after death.

Society’s capitalist orientation of Eid is reflected in the media’s portrayal, as it becomes immensely occupied in the days leading up to the festival in enlightening the public about attires that are in vogue and the projected prices in the cattle market. Articles or essays addressing the spiritual or the religious aspects of this festival rarely make it to the media, since it is of least concern to the majority of the people.

Eid-ul Azha is, from an Islamic perspective, a long-awaited moment of complete submission of one’s desires and yearnings to the will of God through the oblation of a beloved aspect of our life, as Prophet Abraham (pbuh) did while attempting to sacrifice his son. From the tradition of Prophet Abraham’s (pbuh) oblation, comes the obligation of developing propinquity with the sacrificial animal, in such a way that Muslims treat it as their own child.

Humans share a special bond with animals, that is strongly reflected in pet-owners, as the vicinity of the human-animal hearts mould profound love, making them inseparable. Renowned Islamic scholar Sheikh Hamza Yusuf noted in one of his lectures that meat consumption is highly discouraged in Islam and, consequently, through the oblation of the beloved animal, empathy develops within the heart, which potentially cultivates an inner tenderness restricting meat consumption.

In addition, the Eid-ul-Azha also provides us with a remarkable opportunity to learn from the “sacrificial” abilities of the animals, and utilise this learning in our everyday lives, in terms of our relationship with God, and in terms of enhancing our capacity to negotiate with other human beings. The festival of Eid-ul-Azha, in terms of the actual day of celebration and the days prior to it, is a ritual to develop a feeling of respect towards animals through the formation of a spiritual bond.

Unfortunately, the meat-eating mantra has presided over the spiritual aspect of Eid-ul-Azha, where sacrificial animals are commodified, with little attention being paid to their treatment. For instance, the offering procedure is carried out in a deeply erroneous manner. The beauty of Islam lies in its kindness towards Allah’s creations, and it is for this reason slaughtering an animal in front of another is not permitted, as it inflicts mental torture on the animal witnessing it -- an animal that witnesses the slaughtering of another animal before being slain encounters death twice, for which Islam prohibits it.

Furthermore, Islam discourages an individual from offering sacrifice under two conditions: If the individual's family member(s) is already making a sacrifice that is sufficient for the entire family. And secondly, if one has the slightest suspicion regarding the animal's ill-treatment and suffering, for example, in relation to the animal being transported in appalling conditions, or the possibility of the sacrificial animal being slaughtered in front of another. Under these two circumstances, it is encouraged to pay an amount of money equivalent to the price of a sacrificial animal to a person in need, or to a charitable organisation.

Contemporary Muslim society in Bangladesh regrettably treats Eid-ul-Azha, a highly regarded religious festival, as a "social meat festival," revealing the lack of attachment with the religiousness and spirituality of the event. Acquiring Islamic knowledge is of crucial importance to amend the current social practices and to better serve the religious, spiritual, and social objectives of Eid-ul Azha.